

MARTIN LUTHER – ALWAYS A GOOD CATHOLIC

Leroy Garrett

The repeal of Luther's excommunication by Rome is overdue. – Hans Kung.

[Editor's note: In my estimation, no one can outdo my friend, Leroy Garrett, when it comes to writing a brief essay that gets to the heart of the matter. But Leroy has outdone himself in pointing to our catholic heritage which we have abandoned. This deserves wide publication, so here it is in case you missed it.

[If you act right now, you still may get a copy of Leroy's autobiography, "A Lover's Quarrel: My Pilgrimage in Churches of Christ," at 20% off the regular price of \$14.95. To get this pre-publication discount, call him at 940-891-0494, or email <leroy.ouida@worldnet.att.net>, or write at 1300 Woodlake Drive, Denton, TX 76210. It is due right away.

[His birthday was Dec. 11. You may offer him a belated birthday wish with your order. I won't tell his age, but he is 18 days more youthful than I am. --Cecil]

It is impressive that a Roman Catholic historian-theologian like Hans Kung – in his recent "*The Catholic Church: A Short History*" – would insist that Martin Luther was never "an uncatholic rebel." Moreover, he describes the reformer as "the Catholic Luther," and says he remained a Catholic to the end.

But I need to say in passing that Kung might take exemption to being described as Roman Catholic, a term he labels as "a true oxymoron." If the church is particularly Roman, then it is not Catholic; if it is Catholic, then it is not particularly Roman. So, Roman Catholic is a contradiction, Kung charges, even though he is officially a priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Like some of the rest of us, he has had a long standing quarrel with his church. Part of that quarrel is that he wants his church to be truly catholic.

In reviewing the history of the Reformation, Kung sees Luther as more truly Catholic (or catholic) than those who opposed him and finally excommunicated him. The above quotation is an astounding affirmation coming from anyone within the Roman church: Luther's excommunication by the Roman church back in 1520 should be repealed! He added, "It is one of those acts of reparation which should follow the pope's confession of guilt today."

These references to what is catholic or uncatholic raises the question of what that term means. Kung defines it as that which is believed always, everywhere and by all, and always according to scripture. The catholic church is the church universal – not racially, nationally, culturally, or politically defined. It is made up of all believers everywhere, equally related to each other in Christ. It is part of the church's ancient creed: "*We believe in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic*

church." To be the true catholic church it must be all four of those qualities: united, filled with the Holy Spirit, made up of all peoples, and rooted in apostolic teaching.

Kung allows that Luther's call for reformation – which he sees as being more of a call for spiritual renewal than a reform of doctrine – was consistent with the Old Catholic tradition that preceded the decadent medieval centuries. Even Luther's emphasis on the primacy of Christ (rather than the pope) and the primacy of Scripture (rather than ecclesiastical tradition) were consistent with Old Catholic spirituality. And Luther's "*Christ alone*," "*grace alone*" and "*justification by faith alone*" were not heretical in Catholic theology.

Kung notes that still other things that were at the heart of the Luther's reformation – repudiation of the church's claim of authority over the state, and the pope's claim to infallibility and as the only true interpreter of Scripture – were consistent with ancient Catholic thought.

So Kung is calling for a Roman Catholic reinterpretation of the Reformation – which he sees as revolutionary for the church as the Copernican revolution was for science. Luther was right, he says, and the Roman curia was wrong. Luther was the true Catholic (or catholic), while the Roman hierarchy was uncatholic! And why did the Reformation happen – causing Rome's second great catastrophe of losing much of the West after losing the East centuries before to Orthodoxy? Kung says it was caused by the refusal of Rome to change when it was abundantly clear that change was imperative.

It is noteworthy that this appeal to catholicity found expression in the writings of the founders of our own Stone-Campbell heritage. When Thomas Campbell wrote in his Declaration and Address, "*The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures,*" he was referring to the catholicity of the church.

He was saying that the church by its very nature as the body of Christ is one, and it consists of all those everywhere who believe in and obey Christ. This is the universal or catholic church. When he wrote those lines in 1809 he did not yet have a single congregation of his own, which would eventually be known as Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, or Churches of Christ. And yet he spoke of "*the Church of Christ upon earth.*" Where was that church? His answer: in "*every place*" where there are those who are committed to Christ.

The one church of Jesus Christ was not any of the various sects or denominations -- nor a totality of them -- but the faithful Christians amongst them. All such disciples of Christ around the world – in every place – make up the church universal, Thomas Campbell was saying. By its very nature the church is one, holy, apostolic, and catholic.

Thomas Campbell's son Alexander launched a movement "*to unite the Christians in all the sects.*" In his earlier years Alexander saw unity in terms of "*a restoration of the ancient order of things*" – unity through restoration. He came to see that this approach has a problem, for there is no agreement on the details of the ancient order. By 1839 – he was now 51 -- he conceded that while unity had long been his "darling theme," it had not been clear to him how unity was to be realized. In that year he set before an ecumenical gathering in Lexington, Kentucky a resolution that served as a mid-course correction for his plea for unity.

In that resolution he called for unity – not on the basis of a restoration of the ancient order – but upon what he called "*the catholic rule of union.*" He spelled it out: "*Whatever in faith, in piety, and morality is catholic, or universally admitted by all parties, shall be adopted as a basis of union.*" His resolution – which was approved at the Lexington gathering by an overwhelming standing vote – is consistent with Kung's definition of catholicity – that which is commonly believed and practiced by Christians everywhere.

The catholic rule of unity implies that in things not catholic – opinions, theologies, methods – there will be liberty. This gave form to a unity aphorism that goes back to the Reformation, but popularized in Stone-Campbell:

In essentials (things catholic), unity;

In opinions (things not catholic), liberty;

In all things, love.

Alexander Campbell eventually found the term catholic useful in defining his movement. He was fond of saying, "*We are very catholic*" – not Roman or Greek Catholic, but "*just catholic.*" His plea for unity was a catholic plea. His people wore a catholic name, for all believers can be simply Christians or Disciples. They practiced a catholic baptism in that all agree that immersion is biblical. They served a catholic Table in that all believers are invited. They looked to a catholic Book – rather any human creed -- for their rule of faith and practice in that all Christians agree that the Bible is the word of God. If we could recover this vision of the catholicity of the church we would be both less provincial and less sectarian. And it would help to get us back on track as the unity people we have been called to be. []

(Cecil Hook: December 2003)